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Vorwort


Liminal Anthropologie bezeichnet einen zentralen Wirkungsbereich liminaler Strukturen: den Entwurf des Menschen. Denn der Mensch ist vielfältig auf Zwischenzeiten, Schwellenphänomene und Zwischenräume bezogen, und er ist dies, so die Theorie, in einer konkreten, ursprünglichen, nicht nur in einer sekundären, abgeleiteten Art. Liminal Anthropologen stellen also die Frage nach dem Wesen des Menschen, wenden diese aber in einer spezifischen Weise: Sie argumentieren weder identitätstheoretisch, also ausgehend von einer von vorn herein gegebenen Identität des Menschen, noch alternativtheoretisch, also ausgehend von der Erfahrung reinlicher Freiheit. Liminal Anthropologen fokussieren vielmehr diejenigen Phänomene und Prozesse anthropologischer Selbstverortung, die sich im zeitlichen, räumlichen und systematischen Durstwischen ergeben. Der Mensch erscheint so nicht als etwas Gerichtetes, sondern als ein Verbundenes, nicht als ein Bestimmtes, sondern als ein zu Bestimmendes. Für dieses Verständnis, dieses Bestimmens bietet die Zone, die Schwelle, der Übergang den paradigmatischen Ort.


Damit kreuzen die Beiträge zwei mittlerweile etablierte Untersuchungsperspektiven der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften: Zum einen die Frage nach kulturellen

Hawthornes Erzählung scheint sie zwei Seiten ein und derselben Entwicklung zu ver- 
köpfern, nicht des religiösen, sondern ehes des technologischen Strebens nach Vervoll- 
kommung. Das Heterotopien-Essenbeine von Burnhams White City und Holmes' 
Mondhaus entwickeln sich zum Liminal-Szenario, wortr Araminus und Prognostizität 
inseitender übergehen. Die dialektische Verschränkung der technologischen Utopie 
Burnhams und der ebenso technologischen Hölle von Holmes besitzt Züge, die an 
Hortkheimer und Adorno’s Diktum in der Dialektik der Aufklarung (1947) erinnern, dass 
Auffärbung in Mythologie zurückkehrt.67 Die Implikation der Tendenz zur Aufbür- 
zung der binär metonymischen Struktur von Lascos Roman in ein Paradigma meta-
phorischer Äquivalenz bezieht dazu, dass der technologische Triumph der White City 
icht ohne den Triumph des transparenten Bösen zu haben ist, der sich in den Monden 
von Holmes personalisiert, aber auch in den gewalttätigsten Unternehmen um die Weltansiel-
lung kollektiv zeigt.68

67 Theodor W. Adorno und Max Höckheimer: Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente, 

Juliane Braun
On the Verge of Fame
The Free People of Color and the French Theatre in Antebellum New Orleans

In 1837, L’Union, New Orleans’s first black newspaper, reprinted a long serial article 
etitled Souvenirs de la Louisiane ou Mémoires de Louisiane that had originally appeared in 
the Port-au-Prince newspaper L’Opinion nationale. In this article, Joseph Colatin 
Roussou, free man of color and recent immigrant to Haiti, looks back on his life in New 
Orleans and relates the following incident, taking place at the city’s French theatre in 
1837:

In 1837, a group of barbarmen, arrogant men went so far as to take away the seats 
at the Théâtre d’Orléans reserved for people of color. They claimed that the 
people of color were dressed in too much finery and so offended the dignity of 
their daughters. But, in speaking with certain white families, we learned the true 
reason for this insult. Rumor had it that the young white ladies, who were jealous 
of and ashamed by the beauty and elegance of these daughters of Africa, 
demanded that they be hidden away so that they, the white girls, would no longer 
be overshadowed by the beautiful women of color. When they learned of this 
insult, the fathers of these colonial girls [.] quietly abandoned the Théâtre 
d’Orléans. That same year the hommes de couleur of New Orleans opened the 
Théâtre Marigny, funded it entirely on their own, and appointed an 
administration drawn from their own ranks. All the actors who set foot on this 
stage were people of color, except for a few bit parts, walk-on roles, and maids 
and servants who were played by whites.1

This, according to Joseph Colatin Roussou, was how the first theatre for the free 
people of color in New Orleans came into being and operated. In this essay I hope to 
give a more detailed and perhaps a more differentiated account of the theatrical 
tradition that emerged from New Orleans’s free people of color. When examining the 
cultural productions of the free people of color in New Orleans in the nineteenth 
century it is important to recognize what historians Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Corse

1 “En 1837, ces messieurs pouvaient leur beccher méchancet jusqu’à faire entrer aux familles de 
couleur la place qu’elles avaient au théâtre d’Orléans, parce qu’elles étaient trop de luxe, dressait-elles, 
lorsque elles y étaient aux leurs filles, mais, dans les المنا و familles blanches, tous sait tout 
ce qui se passait [...] La chronique disait qu’elles s’étaient trouvées blessées de la beauté et de l’éloquence 
des jeunes filles de la mo africaine et qu’forcé des plains, elles étaient parvenues à denger d’elles 
ces jeunes beaux qui les effrayaient. Mais ces pères des familles noires qui avaient un tel affaire 
tous hommes d’intelligene, et qui avait déjà remarqué que le théâtre est le flamberge civilisateur des 
nations, ont résisté sans murmurer eu, dans le même année, le théâtre Marigny fut ouvert pour eux 
e de leurs propres deniers. Ils nommèrent une administration composée par eux-mêmes. Tous les 
sujets qui montraient sur cette scène furent pris dans les rangs de leurs tribus, à l’exception de quelques 
compagnes, figurants, ou domestiques qui furent les blancs” [Union [Nouvelle-Orléans], May 7, 1863]. 
Bell called “a fundamental cultural duality in the city’s black community.” Indeed, the city’s black ethnic strays to the French-speaking residents after the Louisiana Purchase caused a similar divide within the Crescent City’s black community. Francophones free people of color, Logsdon and Bell were, “formally learned French intellectual traditions” whereas English-speaking free blacks who had migrated to New Orleans from the North after the Louisiana Purchase “acclimated to Anglo-American traditions, and approached events with strategies derived from their own historical experience in the Anglo-American world.” This essay is concerned with the French-speaking contingent of the free black population of New Orleans, the so-called gens de couleur libres, or simply, as I will refer to them in this essay, free people of color.  

Louisiana’s free people of color had emerged under the French and Spanish colonial administrations as a separate group that distinguished itself sharply from the enslaved population, but was denied full equality by the whites that stigmatized them for their skin color. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, their number had increased steadily through manumission, migration, and natural growth. The practice of placage — whereby a free woman of color entered into a long-standing, formalized relationship with a white man — and the arrival of numerous refugees from the turmoil in Saint Domingue accounted especially for the rise of free blacks in New Orleans. Between 1805 and 1810, the number of free people of color in New Orleans more than tripled, from 1,566 to 4,950, and continued to increase throughout the antebellum period. The sheer number and relatively elevated position of the free people of color within New Orleans society troubled Louisiana’s New American administration. Many free blacks had gained military training in free black militias under the Spanish colonial role, had acquired property and wealth, owned small businesses and dominated the skilled trades in New Orleans. They worked as carpenters, and shoemakers, tailors, and seamstresses, laundresses and shopkeepers. Some of them even owned plantations and slaves. Free blacks could testify in court, make wills, and were allowed to carry arms. They formed their own congregations, established their own schools, founded neighborhood associations and mutual aid societies. With a literacy rate of 80 per cent in 1850 New Orleans’ free blacks were extremely well educated, and some of them had attended renowned schools and conservatories in France.  

Although the free people of color seemingly prospered in antebellum New Orleans, their unique position within New Orleans society was continuously threatened by increasingly restrictive legislation passed by an American administration eager to impose on Louisiana the dual racial hierarchy that reigned elsewhere in the United States. Stamped by fears of potential insurrections and alliances between the free black and the enslaved populations the new American government of Louisiana passed a series of laws that sought to curtail the rights of the free black population. Nevertheless, until the mid-1840s, the free people of color in New Orleans managed to defend their unique social position. They restrained themselves, as historian Shirley Thompson writes, “in the nebulous realm between free and slave, between black and white, and between French and American.” New Orleans’ free people of color thus truly were in a position of liminality that cultural anthropologist Victor Turner characterized as “neither here nor there; [...] be twixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” As a study of the free black community in antebellum New Orleans, this essay seeks to provide one example of how questions of liminality were negotiated in and around the theaters of the Crescent City. While several book-length studies on the free people of color in antebellum New Orleans have been written, none of them more than mentions their theatrical activities. Studies on the black theatre of the United States


also only briefly address the existence of separate theatres for New Orleans's free people of color, but a systematic analysis of their repertoires has not yet been undertaken. Given the very limited number of materials on the theatre of the free people of color, this is unsurprising. The few existing newspaper articles, playbills and legal documents that constitute our sources are often haphazardly legible. In many cases, it is impossible to uncover today the contributions of the free black population to society that is lost gone. Moreover, achievements by free black men and women were, in the words of Alfred Hunt, "dastfully ignored or purposefully misattributed by unsympathetic whites in the nineteenth century." More often than not, it is by understanding what has been omitted that a coherent picture gradually emerges.

The task at hand in this essay is thus primarily one of recovery, I will start by tracing the presence of free people of color in the francophone theatres of New Orleans, teasing out their impact on the early formations of a francophone theatrical culture in the Crescent City. Next, I will examine more closely the 1837 breaking point in theatrical race relations and the ensuing foundation of two theatres by and for free people of color in New Orleans, 1833-1865. Dir. Tulane U. 1952. Among the works listed above only Gehman, Building, Steckles, and Everett allude to the theatrical activities of New Orleans's free black population. Gehman mentions the participation of the free people of color in New Orleans's theatrical life in two instances without yielding any detailed information (p. 53, 69-70). Building's treatment of the theatrical activities of free people of color in the antebellum period is more limited although it may be owed to his focus on the postbellum period (p. 13). Steckles discusses the theatregoing practices of black New Orleanians in three brief instances (p. 68-69, 245, 278), whereas Everett mistakenly states that free blacks were not allowed to perform on any of New Orleans's antebellum stages (p. 221). Important studies of Louisiana's free people of color in the colonial period include Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's African in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Meso-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century. Baton Rouge 1992; Kimberly S. Hanger's Bounded Lives; and Jennifer Spear's Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans. Baltimore 2009. Hanger mentions the existence of quadrille actresses as part of New Orleans's first theatrical troupes (p. 144).


The activities of New Orleans's free people of color are traceable at least to a degree because they were more openly discussed by their masters by life, by their detractors, by their kin and friends, by their communities and by their legal documents (Law of March 31, 1808, quoted in Marcus Christian Anderson, Acts and Attitudes: The Rights of Free People of Color, p. 30). This directive was followed only inconsistently though Sylvia Kittinger Brown Free Persons of Color, p. 25; Rosalind Toler/Harry Louis Chrétien: New Orleans Architecture, p. 83).


people of color that Colas-Rousseau described in the opening sequence of this essay. Considering the material conditions of the two theatres — including their location and interior layout — as well as their admittance policies, troupes, and repertoire, I assess the function of these playhouses for a population that was bound to remain in a position of liminality throughout the antebellum period. Through an analysis of four of the plays performed at the free black theatres I uncover the relevance of a seemingly outdated and imported repertoire for the day-to-day experiences of New Orleans's free black population. Ultimately, I argue that New Orleans's free people of color developed a distinct theatrical tradition that reflected as well complicated the specific contours of their liminal position within the city.

Free people of color initially became involved with the New Orleans stage when, in the wake of the slave insurrections in Saint Domingue in 1791, many educated free blacks fled the uprisings to find refuge in Louisiana. Among the first refugees was a Mme Durouasco who took over the directionship of New Orleans's first theatre in 1793, one year after its inception. Saint Domingue became the site of a lively theatre scene since the 1740s, and at least from 1775 onwards the playhouses of Saint Domingue had made provisions for free people of color in the audience, first only in less desirable seats but towards the end of the colonial period also in the first loges. Blacks were allowed to appear on stage, and in some cases, run their own theatres or managed their own companies. The theatres of Port-au-Prince, Saint Marc and Léogâne especially had been shaped by the contributions of free black theatre owners, musicians, and actors. With Mme Durouso, this Saint Domingue custom was transferred to New Orleans. She introduced to the city's theatre-going public quadrille actresses who were so well received that the former governor of Louisiana, Esteban Miró, feared they "might be encouraged to aspire to greater privileges than good custom dictates." Despite their initial success, a controversy surrounding another black immigrant actor from Saint Domingue some twenty years later shows how the racial climate in New Orleans's playhouses gradually changed. In 1812, fourteen actors employed at the Théâtre Saint-Philippe wrote a letter to acting mayor Nicolas Critil expressing their unwillingness to appear on the same stage as a black actor. They state:

We have learned that in the theatre where we give our performances a special production is being prepared in which a certain Dupé, man of color will appear. We have refused to accept this individual among us [...] and we would


10 Given the close connection between Saint Domingue/Haiti and New Orleans at the beginning of the nineteenth century, I believe there is a possibility that the Dupé who hoped to appear on the New Orleans stage in 1812 is Antoine Dupé, black playwright and actor from Haiti. In 1812 during the siege of Port-au-Prince, Antoine Dupé wrote and composed patriotic songs, then left this city before he returned in 1813 to form a theatre troupe. Nothing is known about his whereabouts during his
rather renounce the theatre which makes our livelihood than reappear at [theatres] in this playground. We ask you to [...] give the necessary orders to stop a production that at the moment hurts the conventions and could even compromise the tranquility [...] in the theatre.13

I have been unable to find out if Dupré did perform, but it is obvious from the letter that the tide had turned against black performers in New Orleans.

Similarly, a more antagonistic atmosphere started to be felt in the auditorium. Although the two French theatres in existence in New Orleans at the beginning of the nineteenth century had made provisions for free people of color in the second tier of logs and had set off sections where slaves could sit, it was not until 1816 that the theatres in New Orleans were legally segregated. The ordinance passed on June 8, 1816 read as follows: "It shall not be lawful for any white person to occupy any of the places set apart for people of color, and the latter are likewise forbidden to occupy any of those reserved for white persons, at any public exhibition or theatre."14 With this law in place, New Orleans's most prominent white French theatre, the Théâtre d'Orléans, was constructed with an interior layout that differed from that of its predecessors. Upon opening in 1819, the Théâtre d'Orléans featured not two, but three tiers of logs. Free people of color were now to sit in the third tier, their accustomed seats in the second tier being designated for white female patrons. This seating arrangement was met with criticism in the press: "At all time in New Orleans," an article in the Louisiana Courrier read, "the [second boxes] have been assigned to the colored population, and it [is] a kind of injustice to deprive them of a right which time and usage had secured them."15 However, the female patrons for whom the second tier was designated did not frequent the theatre sufficiently. The seats stood empty, and John Davis, the director of the Théâtre d'Orléans lost more than $15,000 in revenue in the theatre's first season. Consequently, he changed his seating policy, and from the 1820/1821 season onwards, free people of color were allowed back into the second tier. Slaves could now legally attend a performance by sitting in the third tier.16

This arrangement lasted until 1837. In the summer of 1837, the new directorial board of the Théâtre d'Orléans announced a series of substantial renovations that would "dispose everything for the better." The result of said renovations was advertised in one newspaper as follows: "The condition of the second [tier of boxes] has much improved, and its purpose changed. Families can now secure their seats, either in the first or second [tier] in the same manner, the entrances and the prices being the same."17 A week later, the same paper praised the transformation this theatre had undergone to become "a true temple of taste and fine art," suggesting against all contemporary accounts that this theatre had not been a place of elegance, decorum and good manners before its renovation.18 It is unlikely whether the new administration of the Théâtre d'Orléans merely pushed the free people of color out of their accustomed seats in the second tier to sit in the third tier with the slaves, or if both slaves and free people of color were banned from the Théâtre d'Orléans altogether. It probably made little difference to New Orleans's free black population, who worked so intimately not to be conscripted with the slaves.

II.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Pauloungs Marigny and neighboring Washington complained about the lack of entertainment in their part of town, pointing out the difficulty of getting to the Théâtre d'Orléans in the French Quarter (Vieux Carré) without "driver, coach, and horses at hand".19 Located outside the city's original boundaries between the Vieux Carré and inhospitable swampland on the Mississippi River, Marigny was developed between 1805 and 1811 on the lands of a former plantation. Although being situated in what Shirley Thompson called a "geographically marginal space of questionable hygiene" Marigny evolved into a bustling hub of residential and commercial activity.20 While Marigny was never intended as an artefacts from Haiti, but let, like so many other refugees, may have come to New Orleans. Born on the island, Dupré toured France and England as an actor, albeit with only modest success. He was killed in a duel on January 13, 1816. He wrote numerous plays with Haitian themes such as La Mort de Lamour, issue Fulé, and Miroir (Robert Corentin: Le théâtre balain des origines à nos jours. Montréal 1973, p. 52-56; Esquisse sur les hommes des lettres d'Haiti Dupré. In Revue des Colonies [Paris], Mai 1837. 9 année, No. 11, p. 469-72).
13 Letter from the actors of the Saint Philip Theatre to acting Mayor Nicolas Giroux, November 24, 1816. Minor Wisdom Collection, General Manuscripts, Special Collections Division, Tulane University: "Nous avons appris qu'on préparait, sur le théâtre où nous donnons nos spectacles, une représentation extraordinaire dans laquelle un nommé Dupré, homme de couleur, doit jouer. Nous avons refusé de prendre cet individu parmi nous, [...] et notre détermination est si formelle à cet égard, et notre volonté si unanime que nous renonçons plutôt à la Comédie, qui fait notre existence que de repartir après sur le Théâtre. Nous vous prions, Monsieur le Maire, de [...] donner les ordres nécessaires pour arrêter une représentation qui blesse dans le moment actuel les convenances et qui pourait même compromettre la tranquillité que vous voulez voir égales au spectacle." Les acteurs du théâtre Saint-Philippe à Montréal-Girou (Maire de la Ville de la Nouvelle-Orléans, November 24, 1812. John Minor Wisdom Collection, Tulane University).
15 Qtd. in: Rouzieau Théâtral/Mary Louise Cheesman: New Orleans Architecture, p. 98.
17 "A quoi la stéréosynarque des théâtres Français. On nous promet merveilleux. Tout est disposé pour le mieux. [...] Le Compagnie du Théâtre d'Orléans donne avise que, de grandes améliorations ayant eu lieu au théâtre, le livret pour la location des loges, est ouvert au bureau du contrôleur, rue d'Orléans. La condition des seconds étant de beaucoup améliorée, et leur destination changée, les familles peuvent maintenant se poser de places, soit au premier, soit au secondes, indistinctement, les entrées et les prix en étant les même" (Abelle de la Nouvelle-Orléans, N° 7, 1837).
18 "Le Théâtre d'Orléans a fait sa réouverture jeudi dernier avec une pompe toute à fait remarquable. L'édifice répand de la manière la plus élégante, semble s'étant métamorphosé en un vrai temple du goût et du bon ton" (Abelle, Nov. 13, 1837).
19 "Mais je suis prêté de le dire, on ne peut guêter aimer le théâtre et vivre au Pauloungs Washington, à moins de s'occuper ses ordres, coucher, voitures et chevaux, ce qui malheureusement je n'ai pas" (Abelle, March 8, 1838).
exclusively black neighborhood, up to 75 percent of the properties there had been owned by a free person of color by the end of the antebellum period. As limited space outside of the old city center Faubourg Marigny and Washington provided unique opportunities for entertaining free people of color, and it was in Marigny that many of the defining institutions of the free black population emerged.

Although Marigny was still lagging behind the French Quarter in the 1830s, its residents worked hard to turn it into an agreeable neighborhood that included centers of commercial activity and community interaction. Marigny’s main artery was Champs Elysées (Elysian Fields), a long street that connected the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain and on which the Pontchartrain Railroad started to operate in 1831, transporting goods and people between the lake and the river. The town square of Marigny was Washington Square, located relatively close to the River on Elysian Fields between Casa Calvo (Royal) and Greatfin (Dauphine). Emerging on the intersection of Frenchmen, Victory (Decatur) and Esplanade was a small commercial district where two prominent free black men owned a complex of buildings that housed apartments and warehouses. Julien Lacroix established Marigny’s finest grocery store, whereas his brother François dressed the elite of the Marigny and Vieux Carré residents in his capacity as a tailor. Marigny also boasted a very nice hotel, which the Louisiana Courier described as “furnished in a new and splendid style, unequalled in this country.”

It is not surprising that in this environment the demands for a local theater grew louder. On February 14, 1838, the city council of the Third Municipality, which included Marigny, accorded to E.V. Mathieu, free man of color, the right to establish a theater specifically for people of color. Six weeks later, on April 3, 1838 the first playbill of the new Théâtre Marigny appeared in L’Abbe. “With the permission of the authorities,” Casimir Delarivière’s École de l’Événillé (School for Old Men) was performed on the same day in costumes “newly made” for the occasion. From then on the Théâtre Marigny, located on the corner of Champs Elysées and Bons Enfants (Elysian Fields and Saint Claude Ave.) was open for one night a week, usually on Sunday, with the occasional additional performance either on Thursday or on Wednesday. The new playhouse was, just like the Théâtre d’Orléans and the American playhouses of New Orleans, exempt from taxes, and required to keep at their disposal a box for the mayor and other city dignitaries. The city administration furthermore reserved the right to place a guard in the theatre, should this become necessary and stipulated that the theater’s little bar had to be closed as soon as the theatrical representation was over. Some of New Orleans’ most prominent free men of color were involved in running the theater. Responsible for ticket sales and subscriptions, for example, were Basile Crocket, mathematician and fencing instructor, and Louis Séjour, father of the famous playwright Victor Séjour, who sold tickets from his dry goods store on the corner of Saint Philip and Bourbon Sts. in the French Quarter.

Although founded by a free man of color specifically for free people of color, the new playhouse was well frequented by black and white patrons alike. In 1838 the New Orleans Daily Picayune reported not only that the free people of color “took there [... in greater numbers] but also that “[m]any white people [...] attend this establishment, the least order being observed.” Not only did white people attend, but they were indistinguishably seated among the free blacks. Slaves, on the contrary, were strictly prohibited from entering. This practice was maintained even after the directorship changed in July, when a man named Vitalis took over the management of the Marigny after it had stood vacant and had been up for sale during most of July. While notifying his patrons of the structural changes he made to the building – the Marigny would from now on have ventilation to breathe the hot summer days in New Orleans – he went to great length justifying the changes he did not make. Vitalis wrote:

Considering social conventions and the custom of the country, we would have liked to make some changes to the preceding already established in the Marigny Theatre concerning the seating arrangement. However, since the smallness of the venue did not allow us to favor one category without hurting the other, we had to forgo these measures. Let us hope it will be possible for us one day to satisfy all demands regarding this issue in a larger establishment. [...] Meanwhile, we provide for everyone the possibility to place themselves, the first to subscribe will of course have the best seats.

26 For a description of Faubourg Marigny, see Shirley Whiting Thompson: Exiles at Home, p. 156-37.
Especially in light of the seating controversy at the Théâtre d’Orléans in the previous year, Matriny’s choice to remain in the mixed seating — against, as he said, current social conventions — is remarkable. Vitalis’s casual and somewhat vague phrasing does not, however, imply that he seriously intended to make the expected changes. Rather, the lack of space seems to have served as a mere pretext to forgo any alterations he might have been pressured to make. Despite Vitalis’s brave attempts to preserve the Marigny announcements for only three more shows appeared in the newspaper after he assumed directorship. After one last performance “on popular demand” on September 23, 1838 the Théâtre Marigny disappeared.30

A second theater for the free people of color was proposed a little more than a year after the end of the Marigny in September 1838. On January 11, 1840 three men, Messrs. Jérôme, Eude, and Lentermier received permission from the city council to establish a theatre and ballroom on the corner of Grands Hommes and Champs Élysées (Dauphine St. and Elysian Fields). This location was in the heart of Paulborg Marigny, adjacent to Washington Square, three blocks closer to the Vieux Carre than the Marigny Theatre and in the place where a former amateur troupe, the Théâtre des Elèves, had once given its performances.31 Appropriately, the new theater was named Théâtre de la Renaissance. It opened on June 26, 1840, after it was postponed three times because the scenes had not been finished.32 From then on it ran two regular performances a week, one on Sunday and one on Thursday, with the exceptional occasional show on Wednesday or Friday. The space serving as a theatre and ballroom did not seem to have been originally designated as a playhouse but was probably a larger private dwelling that had been repurposed. Despite these spatial constraints, the Théâtre de la Renaissance seemed to have been a bigger enterprise than the Marigny. It featured a decorated balcony, a bar, and above all, a resident orchestra. This orchestra was conducted by M. Constantin, who in all likelihood was M. Constantin Debarque, eminent free black violin teacher and director of the Negro Philharmonic Society that at the time had more than one hundred active members.33

30 “Cette représentation est à la demande générale du public... 31” (Abbeville, Sept. 18, 1838).

31 The Théâtre des Elèves opened in this location from mid-May to the beginning of July 1838. Along with numerous amateur amateur performers, some of the Théâtre d’Orléans’s most popular comic actors such as M. Anselme, M. Noiret, M. Fédéric, Mme Lassaux, Mlle Espérit, and Mme Meyer appeared on a regular basis on the stage of the Théâtre des Elèves. The New Orleans Daily Picayune reported on May 29, 1838: “We ’dropped in’ at [Théâtre des Elèves] on Sunday evening, and were much pleased with the manner in which some of the better French vaudevilles are brought out. The actor is at the corner of Champs-Élysées and Rue des Grands Hommes, and boasts the attractions of one or two very pretty women and good actors, besides Moos. Victoria, the best comic comedian who has ever appeared upon the boards of a French theatre in this city” (p. 2). See also, “Theatre,” A Guide to the Theatre, p. 20). Giving an average of two performances a week (Sundays and Thursdays) it is in direct opposition to the Théâtre Marigny until both theatres almost simultaneously ceased to operate at the beginning of July. As Vitalis took over the directorship of the Marigny he announced that his new troupe would be composed of “the elite of the actors of the Théâtre des Elèves, distinguished talent from the Théâtre d’Orléans, and the best artists of the former Marigny troupe,” a statement that further clarifies the assumption that the troupe of the Marigny consisted of both black and white actors (Abbeville, July 25, 1838). Information on the Théâtre des Elèves is very scarce beyond what is given here, and there is no evidence that free people of color were involved in its operations.

32 See Abbeville, Jan. 18, 22, 24, 1840.

33 See Abbeville, Jan. 15, Feb. 10, April 5, 1840; Henry Arnold Klein: Music in New Orleans, p. 234-36. The resolution permitting to the founding of the Théâtre de la Renaissance read as follows: “Resolu
small, and chiefly composed of amateurs. The most famous black actor to appear on the stages of the Marigny and the Renaissance was a man named Edmond Orseaux. In remembrance of the great French tragedian, he was lauded as "the Talmi of our [- -] theatre," and accordingly usually cast in the male lead. At the Marigny, he was supported by Armand Lamusse who is remembered today chiefly for his contributions to La Comédie, the first American poetry anthology to feature works by black writers. Several other members of both troupes however were almost certainly white. Originally recruited in France to appear on the stage of the white Théâtre d'Orléans, these actors had been engaged by the director of the Marigny in 1838 to strengthen this troupe. Among them was M. Victorin, the "best eccentric comedian who has ever appeared on the boards of the French theatre in this town." Initially one of the stars of the Théâtre d'Orléans, Victorin had spectacularly fallen out with that theatre's director in 1836. Victorin and his colleagues from the Théâtre d'Orléans acted alongside Edmond Orseaux and other black performers in both theatres. Later, Victorin even took over directorial duties in a joint appointment with Orseaux at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. In 1840, the troupe at the Théâtre de la Renaissance was further strengthened by two new acquisitions from the Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin in Paris. M. Dorsey rallied Edmond Orseaux for the male lead, and Mile Marie usually played the principal female role. Dorsey was so successful that a newspaper writer suggested he might soon appear on the stage of the white Théâtre d'Orléans in front of New Orleans's true [theatre-going] public. Black and white actors alike thus performed at both the Marigny and the Renaissance, but it was in the repurposed Théâtre de la Renaissance that white actors continued to be allowed on the stage even though white spectators were officially banned from that theatre's audience. Defying city regulations and customs established at the white theatres of New Orleans the free black theatres continued to be focal points in the social life of the Third Municipality and provided a unique venue for the interaction between black and white theatregoers, actors, and directors.

46 Union, May 7, 1863; Rédolphe Lucien Deudhans: Nos hommes et notre histoire: Notice biographique accompagnée de récits et de souvenirs personnels. Montreal 1911, p. 32. Edmond Orseaux was sometimes also billed as Edmond Orso, or simply as M. Edmond.
47 Rédolphe Deudhans writes of Armand Lamusse's involvement with the theatre. He was usually simply billed as M. Armand (Rédolphe Lucien Deudhans: Nos hommes et notre histoire, p. 32, Abbeville, April 21, 1836).
48 See Abbeville, July 25, 1838.
50 See Abbeville, Nov. 24, 1836.
51 See Abbeville, March 14, 1840.
52 See Abbeville, Feb. 1, 20, 1840.

"III.

Like the acting personnel, the repertoires of the Marigny and the Renaissance were also remarkably similar, at times even overlapping. While the plays produced at all French theatres in New Orleans almost exclusively consisted of French imports, the fare offered at the Marigny and the Renaissance differed considerably from the repertoire of the Théâtre d'Orléans, a playhouse that showed predominantly operas, usually double-billed with a short vaudeville. Sometimes the Théâtre d'Orléans also offered contemporary dramas, but only rarely scheduled classical comedies or tragedies. Neither the Marigny nor the Renaissance produced operas, primarily for budgetary reasons. Their emphasis clearly lay with comedy and vaudeville, but their repertoire also included tragedies and dramas. A closer comparison between performance listings reveals that the two theatres operated by free people of color devoted considerably more attention to seemingly outdated plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth century than the Théâtre d'Orléans. With its adherence to authors like Corneille, Racine, Beaumarchais and Voltaire, the repertoire of New Orleans's free black theatres bears a much closer resemblance to the repertoire of the theatres in Saint Domingue before the slave insurrection than to the repertoire of its French competitor in New Orleans. This programming choice is remarkable, although the directors of New Orleans's free black theatres did not by any means exclude contemporary pieces from their repertoires.

At both theatres for free people of color, plays revolving around marriage and its challenges dominated the repertoire. Particular favorites included Delavigne's Les Voleurs (School for Old Men, 1823), Beaumarchais's Barbe et Sévère (Barber of Seville, 1775), Seneque's Le Mariage de Raison (The Marriage of Reason, 1826), and Alexandre Dumas's dramas Ternes (Theros, 1831) and Antony (Anthony, 1831). Arguably, plays about the challenges of love and marriage have always been wildly popular on both sides of the Atlantic. However, I contend that the programming choices at both New Orleans theatres catering to free people of color not merely imitated the theatrical repertoire of the metropole, but were instead powerfully inferred by the local experiences of New Orleans's free black population. In France, the first decades of the nineteenth century saw the gradual erosion of the traditional conception of marriage as arranged ("marriage of reason," "marriage of convenience") in favor of a more modern understanding of marriage as based on mutual attraction ("marriage of inclination"). Potential candidates were thus, at least in theory, free to select their spouse.

54 The founders of the Théâtre de la Renaissance did initially promise comic operas, but not once was a performance of this genre billed in the newspaper. Before the theatre's opening, the authorities also agreed to have been suspicious about the kind of spectacle that would be presented at the Théâtre de la Renaissance and consequently made the theatre's managers wait for more than a month before they granted them the usual tax exemption reserved for "high" art deemed worthy of municipal support (Abbeville, Jan. 15, 1840; Council de la Municipalité No. 3, Sénat, 1° mars 1840, New Orleans City Archives).
55 See Abbeville, July 25, 1838; Jan. 15, 1840.
56 Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French plays that appeared both in Saint Domingue and in New Orleans's free black theatres include Voltaire's Le Père de famille (1759), Molière au Théâtre (1745), and Zares (1752), Racine's Andromaque (1667), Corneille's Le Cid (1637), Rousseau's Diggory (1770) and Olympe (Jean Fouchard: Artiste et répertoire des sucreries de Saint-Domingue, Port- au-Prince 1998, p. 87-174).
irrespective of adherence to a specific social class. 46 By contrast, in the same time period, Louisiana law regulated its population's marital alliances more strictly than ever. After marriages between slaves and free people of color had been declared illegal in 1806, the Louisiana Civil Code of 1808 forbade marriages between free blacks and whites. 47 This decree thus obligated antebellum Louisianians to marry within race, but the widely accepted practice of plâcage offered a possibility to circumvent these regulations.

In the practice of plâcage, a free woman of color was set up by a guardian, usually her mother or a close relative, with a white man in order to enter into a contracted, quasi-legitimate marital arrangement. For all participants, plâcage promised to be an advantageous situation: for the young black woman, life in a plâcage arrangement often meant material and social gain, while the man had a (temporary) companion and was at liberty to terminate the arrangement at any time. Prospective candidates were usually matched at a hall organized by the Société Cordon Bleu, an organization of wealthy quadroon mistresses who used these halls specifically to pair their young female protégées with a wealthy white suitor. Participation was by invitation only, and the entrance fee was set high enough to ensure the social standing and material wealth of the prospective white clients. Once a match was made, the guardian of the free woman of color would negotiate a contract with the white man on her protégée’s behalf. In this contract, the man typically agreed to provide financial support for his companion and any potential offspring during their life together. In case of separation, he would endow her with a settlement. Sometimes the plâcage arrangement ended when the man legally married a woman of his own race, in other cases the man maintained a plâcage relationship alongside his conventional marriage. 48

In this environment, the issues of marriage and extra-marital relationships were thus highly charged and held an almost universal appeal. It is thus not surprising that the majority of the plays performed at the Marigny and the Renaissance theatres revolved around the marriage theme. More specifically, most of the marriage-themed plays performed at the free black theatres focused on arranged marriages, illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of such a union and the challenges it inevitably posed to those who were involved. While marriages of convenience closely resembled plâcage relationships in their arranged character, they also differed in two crucial points: aside from financial gain, the main purpose of an arranged marriage was to avoid an improper alliance, a so-called mélange 49 where two people from different social classes married despite at least one family’s opposition to the degradation of status a union with a social inferior would entail. Plâcage arrangements, by contrast, were established precisely to match members of two diverging groups and thus transgressed social and racial boundaries purposefully. However, unlike the wives who were bound to their husbands in a marriage of convenience, women involved in a plâcage arrangement lacked the same legal protection because their union was not officially sanctioned.

The rigid censorship laws and the lack of a native free black repertoire did not allow for an explicit dramatization of plâcage arrangements on the stages of the Théâtre Marigny and the Théâtre de la Renaissance. I argue that imported French plays negotiating the challenges of arranged marriages provided an ideal vehicle to implicitly comment on and critique plâcage arrangements on the stages of New Orleans’s free black theatres. Taking two examples from the repertory of New Orleans’s free black theatres, I will demonstrate how plays imported from the metropolitan stage became invested with debates about the plâcage system.

Performed four times at the Théâtre Marigny and the Théâtre de la Renaissance Eugene Scribe’s The Marriage of Reason was one of the most popular plays on the stages of New Orleans’s free black theatres. 50 Scribe’s vaudevilles celebrate arranged marriages as the only path to enduring marital bliss and indeed a stable relationship. The piece recounts the story of Suzette, a young orphan who was taken in by the aristocratic Bére mont family as a child and now works for that family as a chambermaid. She has fallen for Edouard, Count Bére mont’s son, who reciprocates her feelings. Béremont disapproves greatly of the prospective match and goes to great lengths to prevent Edouard’s relationship with Suzette. While locking Edouard into a room, he arranges for Suzette to marry the elderly Bertrand, a retired soldier. Suzette gradually learns to respect, appreciate and even love her new husband and is thus able to resist Edouard’s continued advances. At the end of the play, the unreleenting Edouard is revealed as a dishonest fraud that has already cuckolded numerous women before Suzette. He is sent away to fulfill his military duties. Thus the last threat to Bertrand and Suzette’s eternal happiness is removed for good.

While Scribe’s Marriage of Reason clearly functions as an ardent defense of the marriage of convenience, Casimir Delavigne’s School for Old Men paints a more balanced picture of the advantages as well as the pitfalls of an arranged marriage. Also staged four times, Delavigne’s comedy focuses on the marriage of Danville, an elderly widower and retired armaments manufacturer who has recently married Hortense, daughter of an impoverished bourgeoisie family and more than forty years his junior. 51 Hortense befriends the young Duke d’Elmar who introduces her into the high society of Paris. The increasingly close alliance between Hortense and the Duke arouses the suspicions of Danville, who suspects the couple as his young wife seemingly succumbs to the charms of the Duke. Danville bitterly regrets his decision of having entered an arranged union with Hortense, but as Hortense is able to prove her love for her elderly husband, the spouses reconcile and leave the temptations of Paris for the country. The play ends on an ambiguous note. While Delavigne clearly exposes the challenges of a marriage of...
convenience, he also contends that it is not doomed per se, and may, in some cases, even lead to permanent happiness.

Although the pieces by Delavigne and Scribe take a different stance on the marriage theme, they share a concern for questions of class. Both playwrights portray boundaries between different social classes as impenetrable. Relationships that would transcend these boundaries are depicted as impossible, and are consequently never consummated. In Delavigne’s Soubat for Old Men, for example, it is ultimately the heroine’s desire for social ascent that is revealed as the true destabilizing force of her marriage. From the beginning Hontense is portrayed as an ambitious woman who sees more in her husband than just a retired armament manufacturer and pushes him to secure a good government post in Paris.33 Her husband Davville, by contrast, is very comfortable with his social station. He suspects that Hontense’s association with the Duke is a direct consequence of her “need to shine” and tries to bring her to his senses by reiterating how important it is that the boundaries between different social classes remain intact.34 “To receive in one’s home a marquis, a duke, or a duchess? That is fine, if one is a duchess— but I am not,” he contends.35 The reasons he gives against the mingling of the classes are grounded in a healthy sense of self-worth and pride in his own achievements:

[Quote account of my common sense, I know what I am worth. To enjoy, without much ado the fruit of my labors, With good people, people that one can understand, Who, when they address us, do not seem to be condescending, Who do not judge me If I speak plainly or laugh too loudly, [. . .] There are my people, those are the friends that I want, Certain that they will be to me what I am to them.]

Uterely unimpressed by her husband’s attempts to convince her, Hontense continues her quest for social ascent, and becomes increasingly blind to the Duke’s improper advances. It is only through his intrusion into Hontense’s apartment late one night that Hontense finally recognizes his true intentions and resolutely rebuffs him. Following this almost cathartic moment Hontense acknowledges her unwarranted desire for social ascent and renounces it by definitively committing to life with her husband in the country, far away from any future temptations.

Whereas the ultimate transgression of social boundaries through the consummation of Hontense’s relationship with the Duke is avasted just in time in the School for Old Men, such a contravention remains purely hypothetical in Scribe’s The Marriage of Braun. The chambermaid Suzette almost immediately relinquishes her feelings for her employer’s son Edouard as soon as she employs Bretonn expresses his disinterest with the prospective match. He cleverly manipulates her into complying by focusing not on his personal fears of social degradation, but instead by illustrating the consequences of their union to Edouard’s and Suzette’s own happiness:

A union [between you and Edouard] is impossible. [. . .] There are proprieties that must be respected, and society aversion itself on those who dare to defy them. If my son were to marry your mother’s chambermaid, in the world where he would want to introduce you, public opinion would reject you. He would realize this himself, he would be humiliated because of you, and soon he would no longer love you, for unfortunately self-esteem is the primary motive of love. Then, declined by society, abandoned by your husband, you would only have me [. . .].35

In an interesting reversal of perspectives, Bretonn does not present himself as the main obstacle to Suzette’s and Edouard’s union. Rather, he blames society itself, outlining what will happen to those who challenge its conventions. According to Bretonn, the future for those who dare to transgress social boundaries is grim. The class difference between Suzette and Edouard would act like a slow poison that destroys their marriage from within. Presented with such negative prospects, it is unsurprising that Suzette relents. In accordance with the play’s didactic endorsement of arranged marriages, Suzette is ultimately rewarded for her sensible decision with a happy marriage to a worthy man who came from her own class.

The marriage play performed at New Orleans’s black theatres, then, did not condemn arranged marriages per se. Rather, they focused on relationships that violated or were in danger of violating boundaries between different social classes, highlighting the negative consequences if such a transgression did indeed take place. This condemnation of metabolic echoes the growing criticism of place arrangements within the free black community. The writings of some of New Orleans’s most prominent free men of color appear in the literary journal L’Album littéraire Journal des gens gens, amateurs de la littérature (1845) and the poetry anthology Les Condés (1845) especially reflected these concerns. Analyzing the short stories and poems penned by Armand Lannuse and others, historians Nina Möllers and Caryon Bessell describe how free men of color viewed place as a “form of human bondage” and

33 “Davville: Hontense! elle me laisse un pouvoir absolu! Mais elle y voit très clair, quand on a ma fortune. Une capacité qu’elle croit peu commune.” Sans prétendre à Paris au rang d’un potentat! Dans un poste honorable on peut servir l’État! L’espoir qu’elle a conçu me semble légitime.” Et je lui sais bien qu’il est faux d’être humble entre nous (Comédie Delavigne L’École des vieux-dames. Paris 1823 [J.-N. Barbu], I, p. 16)

34 “Davville: Le besoin de beauler a tel point vous domine, Qu’avec un jeune fou je vous voit de sociét’” (ibid., I, p. 69).


36 “Daville: Mais, grâce à son bon sens, je sais ce que je veux! J’ouvre sans fard devant le fruit du meurtrier. Avec de beaux gens, des gens qui peuvent entendre. Qui de leur nom pour nous n’est pas l’âme de descendre.” Qui ne m’obéissent pas pour me prendre en défaut? Si je parle sans gâne ou je fis trop bas [. . .] Voilà mes gens, voilà les amis que je veux. S’é pourrait pour moi et je suis pour eux” (Comédie Delavigne L’École des vieux-dames, II, p. 71-72).

"institutionalized concubinage." The contributors to L’Album and Les Conflits attacked the ambition of the placee’s mother, who, in setting up her daughter for a placage arrangement, traded her daughter’s happiness for material gain that was bound to be merely temporary: “[...], a shamedless mother/ Today sells her heart for her grieving daughter/ And virtue is no more than a useless word which is but pride,” an anonymous writer lamented in a poem entitled A Nouveau Inscrisme published in L’Album. The writers of L’Album and Les Conflits also feared that a woman who lived within a placage arrangement was condemned to a state of perpetual mistrust that would in the long run impair her moral integrity. In To Zaire, for example, Armand Lamaze drastically lays out the consequences of a placage arrangement gone awry: “But soon, Elona, the giver disappeared/ A new affair was again quickly arranged/ Then a few months later, urged by necessity/ The young girl turned to vice,” he exploded. According to Lamaze, these "imputed liasons" would induce promiscuous behavior on the young girl’s part and society ultimately would have no choice but to denounce her as a prostitute.

Through entering a placage arrangement with a white man, a young black woman transgressed the boundaries of her community, and became unavailable to the men of her own race. The practice of placage thus established black women in a position where they belonged "neither here nor there," and deprived free black men of their sisters, daughters or potential wives. Especially for black men, then, the stakes associated with keeping their women within their own social realm were high and provide one explanation for the popularity of plays that illustrated the harsh consequences of transmission on the stages of New Orleans’ free black theaters. Women in attendance were duly warned: Delavigne’s young heroine Hortense barely avoided falling victim to her own ambition. Scribe’s Suzanne emerges unscathed only because the renowned Edouard and the luxuries a union with him had promised, uncompromisingly recognizing and accepting her rightful place in society.

While the marriage plays can be understood as a commentary on the placage system, I argue that a second set of dramatic pieces mentioned in New Orleans’ free black theaters can be read as outlining the psychological and economic repercussions of such relationships on the second generation of free people of color. More specifically, I trace out how plays like Voltaire’s tragedies Zaire (The Tragedy of Zara, 1734) and Mahomet ou Le Fanatisme (Fanaticism or Mahomet, the Prophet, 1741) invoke themes of cultural uprooting and the problematic of growing up between two worlds. For children born into a placage relationship, these questions were part of their day-to-day experience and played out on the stages of the theaters in the Third Municipality. Premiering on May 7, 1840 at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, Zaire focuses on the struggles of its eponymous heroine, a young Christian woman who was abducted from her French family and brought to Sultan Othmane’s Jerusalem seraglio as a young girl.

61 Carryos Canal Belt Revolution, p.112. For an extensive analysis of the treatment of placage in the writings of New Orleans’s free people of color, see ibid., p. 113-17; Nita Moller: Krommie Identité, p.145-53.

62 Ibid. in Carryos Canal Belt Revolution, p. 114.


64 Ibid., see also Nita Moller: Krommie Identité, p. 145-52; Carryos Canal Belt Revolution, p. 112.

65 Victor Turner: Limitations and Communities, p. 95.

66 On the Venge of Fame

only to fall in love with her Muslim keeper.63 Having grown up as a cultural hybrid and not knowing who her parents are, Zaire has felt a sense of loss for as long as she can remember: “[Do]... I know who I am? Has Heaven ever permitted me to know myself?" she asks her friend Fatime.64 Zaire knows that she is probably of Christian birth, but, as "a slave of the Saracens from [her] earliest childhood," she was raised by Muslims. “Habits, and the law,” Zaire explains, “directed me in my first years/ Towards the religion of the fortunate Muslims.” [...]. It was too late when I became acquainted with Christianity.”65 Yet, the cross she wears has at times sparked a feeling in her that she cannot quite explain: “This cross,” she admits, “has often in spite of myself/ Seized my heart and surprised me with respect and reverence.”66

After Zaire discovers the identity of her father and brother, her somewhat abstract sense of division between two faiths suddenly becomes very concrete. Her new family demands a clear commitment to Christian values that is irreconcilable not only with Zaire’s Muslim upbringing, but also with her love for Othmane. Zaire suddenly not only has to choose between remaining a Muslim or converting to Christianity, but also between her proposed marriage to a Muslim suitor and her allegiance to her Christian family and French heritage. Staying with Othmane then would signify Zaire’s complete immersion into the Arabic culture and would inevitably alienate her from her European origins for good. Confronted with this choice, Zaire’s previous notions of identity and belonging collapse and leave her in a state of utter confusion: “What will become of me?” she asks desperately. “Am I indeed either French, or a Sultan’s daughter, or Othmane’s wife? Am I a lover, or a Christian?”67 Zaire experiences an identity crisis that remains unresolved in the course of the play. When she dies, her “heart is desperate,” her “angry soul does not know what it is, nor what it wants.” An awful sense of terror is all she feels.

The two young captives in Voltaire’s second religious play, Mahomet ou Le Fanatisme, face a similar dilemma. Performed three times at the Matigny and Renaissance theaters, Mahomet focuses on Palmire and Sédé, who were both abducted from their families as children and grew up together as slaves of Mahomet, founder of Islam.68 Mahomet seeks to expand his power but is opposed by Zoprie, sheriff of Mecca and, unbeknownst to everyone except Mahomet, father of Palmire and Sédé. During captivity, Palmire and Sédé have developed feelings for each other, but...
Mahomet also desires Palmyre. To rid himself of his rival, Mahomet incites Séide to kill Zopire, leading Séide to believe that his murder of Zopire was an act of God’s will. Séide and Palmyre learn that Zopire was indeed their father, but Séide’s quest for revenge on Mahomet comes too late. He dies from the effect of a poison that had been administered by one of Mahomet’s subordinates.

Séide is susceptible to Mahomet’s manipulative designs only because he “does not have parents, [ . . . ] only a master.”24 This master has filled the emotional void the lack of parents has caused in Séide with fanatic ideas to the point where he believes that “everything outside of being a Muslim is a crime.”25 The inexplicable emotions he feels in the presence of Zopire deeply confuse him: “Where am I? Oh heavens! Where am I? And what am I supposed to do?”26 he asks, torn between Mahomet’s orders and Zopire’s offer of reconciliation.27 His sister Palmyre attributes similar emotions to a feeling of uprootedness: “We do not know the pride of birth; without parents, without a homeland, slaves from childhood, [ . . . ] everything is foreign to us, except for the God that I serve,” she explains to Zopire.28 When he suggests that she stay with him, Palmyre indignantly asks in return: “How can I belong to you? I do not even belong to myself.”29 Her sense of uprootedness disappears immediately though as soon as she discovers a familial bond to Zopire and Séide. Without hesitation, she can thus make her final decision and commits suicide to follow the rest of her family into the realm of the dead instead of staying in this world with Mahomet.

The plight of Zaire, Palmyre and Séide may have resonated with the situation of many of New Orleans’s free people of color. They too, found themselves torn between two cultures, and if they were born into a plagiose relationship that ended early, knew little or nothing about the identity of their fathers. Along with this psychologically challenging situation, the economic state of plagiose children was often precarious. In an attempt to provide for the future of their illegitimate children, fathers could have their offspring officially recognized and thus enable them to inherit a portion of their father’s estate. However, even official legitimization was no guarantee for a life free from economic concerns. In 1828, a new decree stipulated that children conceived in a plagiose relationship could not be legitimated unless their parents were subsequently married. Since inter-racial marriage was still illegal, this law virtually nullified the right of free black children to inherit property or anything else. Although this regulation was in effect only until 1831, the number of fathers willing to have their illegitimate children legally recognized declined steadily.30 Plagiose thus increasingly became what Shirley Thompson called “a danger zone that exposed women of color and their children to the harsh consequences of arbitrary afflictions and loose commitment.”31 Taken together, the two sets of plays I have presented here not only attacked the practice of

plagiose, but they also illustrated the often tragic consequences for those who were involved.

In the increasingly restrictive atmosphere of antebellum New Orleans, free people of color constantly had to defend their position within society. They responded by crafting their own theatrical tradition that was firmly grounded in a Saint Domingan heritage and rigorous training in the French letters. Although both the Théâtre Marigny and the Théâtre de la Renaissance were comparatively short-lived establishments, the information they left behind about the composition of their troupes and repertoires yields interesting insights into a Francophone theatrical culture that emerged from New Orleans’s free black population and came to prosper in the shadow of the famous Théâtre d’Orléans. This tradition simultaneously troubled and reaffirmed the existing racial prejudices that governed antebellum New Orleans society and helped New Orleans’s free black population to escape, at least temporarily, from Victor Turner’s “limbo of statuslessness.”32 Through innovative seating and admission policies as well as sensitive programming they gradually subverted the practices governing at the white Théâtre d’Orléans and negotiated on their stages and in their audience more questions of liminal identity that resonated with their own day-to-day experiences.